

VZCZCXRO8351
RR RUEHGR
DE RUEHWN #0180/01 0831521
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 241521Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7243
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA 0133

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BRIDGETOWN 000180

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12948: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [CU](#) [XL](#)

SUBJECT: Cuban Dissident Blasts Cuban Racism, Sparking Vigorous
Debate in Barbados

Summary

¶1. (SBU) A rare public presentation by a critic of Cuba sponsored by the University of the West Indies drew big crowds, sparked a heated debate, and evoked a hysterical (in both senses of the word) response from the Cuban Ambassador in Barbados. Afro-Cuban dissident Carlos Moore highlighted the pervasive racism that exists in Cuba and the lack of genuinely democratic practices. The willingness of the university and the Barbadian media to provide a forum for critical perspectives of Cuba stood in contrast to both the Barbadian government's usual non-critical support of Cuba in Human Rights fora and the usual academic and media political correctness about the goodness of all things Cuban. The volatile reactions from many audience members to the critical views, however, demonstrated that many Barbadians are still loathe to call their island neighbor to account. End Summary.

Racism Alive and Well in Cuban Paradise

¶2. (U) Carlos Moore, an Afro-Cuban dissident and professor of international studies, delivered a public lecture on the realities and impact of racism in Cuba at the University of the West Indies in Barbados March 19. The lecture, part of a multi-country book tour to promote the professor's recently-completed autobiography, was sponsored by UWI's new Cultural Studies Department. Well attended by university students, members of the public, and current and former members of the diplomatic corps, the presentation has received extensive coverage in the local press.

¶3. (U) Moore's lecture followed on the heels of the publication of an open letter he wrote to Cuban President Raul Castro entitled "Cuba's Big Black Lie." In the letter and in his lecture, Moore derided as deceitful past declarations by Cuba's ruling elite that racial discrimination in Cuba had been eliminated. "Wherever we look in socialist Cuba," Moore contended, "our eyes are confronted with a cobweb of social and racial inequities and racial hatred against black people." In his lecture, Moore shared that, as a young man, he had strongly supported the revolution and been a devotee of Fidel Castro. However, this support quickly turned to disillusionment because of what Moore called the revolutionary government's ineptness at destroying the legacy of white supremacy and racism against Afro-Cubans.

¶4. (U) Moore was among those imprisoned for protesting the revolution's refusal to advance racial integration. He said he spent 28 days in jail, and was subsequently sent to a labor camp for 7 years before escaping to the Embassy of Guinea and eventually making his way to the U.S., after which he lived in exile in several countries for 35 years, still a committed Marxist with strong criticism both for America's Cuba policy and for Cuba's institutionalized racism.

¶5. (U) Moore's key message was that the racial divide and the resulting tension in Cuba have grown over the past 50 years and the

country is now a racial powder keg on the verge of explosion. The situation is dire -- contained, or perhaps only delayed, by the recent release of statistics by Raul Castro that acknowledge a racial problem exists. Moore cited recently released GOC statistics that show, he said, that Afro-Cubans are disproportionately unemployed, under housed, and unrepresented in positions of leadership at all levels. Moore contended that the reality of a small minority white ruling elite in a country that is 70-75 percent Afro-Cuban could not continue for much longer without either providing Afro-Cubans greater access to government, business, and military leadership positions, or facing the real possibility of civil unrest.

Swimming Against a Strong pro-Cuban Stream

¶6. (U) Moore's lecture was followed by a lively question and answer session, during which it quickly emerged that his compelling personal story and factually argued points had swayed few in the audience from their firmly held affinity for Cuba. While some in the audience thanked the professor and focused their questions on distinctions between different kinds of racism and the plight of black women in Cuba, others were aggressive, forcefully pressing professor Moore on why he had not addressed the white communities in Cuba that had also suffered or why he had not highlighted the fact that the Cuban military under Fidel had gone to Africa to liberate blacks from oppression.

Cuban Ambassador Blasts Free Press, Academic Freedom

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¶7. (SBU) The publication of Moore's letter and the extensive media coverage of the lecture sparked an immediate harangue from Cuba's Ambassador to Barbados, who castigated the Nation newspaper for printing what he termed an "outrageous and hostile" article and coverage of an "anti-revolutionary" lecture. The Ambassador also attacked UWI for supporting "the propaganda of defamation and lies against Cuba." Clearly unfamiliar with the role and functioning of a free press, the Cuban expressed his hope that the newspaper "will not publish, in the future, any more unpleasant articles like the one I am complaining about which does not correspond or identify with the traditional and magnificent relations and collaborations which exists between the Government and people of Barbados and the Government and people of Cuba."

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Both UWI and local media are to be commended for providing a forum for a Cuban dissident to air a rare criticism of Cuba in the Eastern Caribbean, where solidarity with Castro's Cuba has long been an unchallenged shibboleth and honest discussions of human rights in Cuba are rare. Nevertheless, the reaction to Moore's comments made it clear that many Barbadians, still anchored in the past of romanticized support for the Cuban revolution, are simply not yet willing or able to come to grips with open criticism of Cuba. While feelings of non-aligned small-state fraternity and appreciation for Cuban medical assistance programs color many opinions in the region, the Barbadian affinity for Cuba still seems oddly juxtaposed against a society that boasts of having the longest democratic traditions in the Hemisphere, holds itself to the highest ideals of protection for human rights, and has labored mightily to overcome its own heritage of slavery and racial division. Still, the willingness of the university and media to contemplate a non-traditional narrative on Cuba offers a glimmer of hope that Barbados could play a more constructive role within the region as it comes to terms with how to deal with an evolving Cuba in the years ahead.

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